

# Uemaaya

No. 6

ICSF's NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

APRIL 2001

## From the Editor

Greetings from ICSF!

This issue brings you, as always, a compilation of articles from different parts of the world. The themes brought out are diverse: the struggles of women processing workers for better working conditions in India; the conditions of work of migrant women crabmeat processors from Mexico; the efforts of fishing communities in Thailand to protect their seas; the initiative taken to increase their income by a group of women fishers in Mozambique, and the reflections of women fishworkers in Brazil on their lives and struggles, among others.

Each region has its own rich culture and folklore. This is often articulated through stories and songs. The write-up from Benin gives a valuable insight into the importance of fish processing and trade in the region, and the extent to which activities related to this are part of local culture and tradition. We carry a song sung by wholesalers indebted to women fish processors. No doubt there are many such songs sung by fishworkers across the world, and we invite you to share them with us.

We also carry a letter from France, an appeal for unity among women of fishing communities, for the "well-being of our communities". We hope to hear your responses to this letter and to the other articles in this issue.

Do send us your write-ups and responses by 15 June 2001.



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## Announcement

### **The West African Fair for Artisanally Processed Fish *Louma Jiggeen ñi\****

(\*In Wolof: Periodic market for women)

**Dakar, Senegal  
2 and 3 June 2001**

The fair is being organized to enable artisanal fish processors and traders to: identify common problems in relation to fish processing and trade at the regional level; make their problem visible to, and to influence, policymakers and the general public; exchange fish processing technologies and establish better trade networks; and to learn about support services (information, credit and technology resources) available within the region.

Participating in the fair will be fish processors and traders from several countries in West Africa, including Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Conakry, Ghana, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Also participating will be organizations working with, and providing support to, artisanal fishing communities in the West African region, policymakers from participating countries, representatives of international and sub-regional organizations working with fisheries-related issues in the region and organizations and individuals working with fish processing technologies.

More information about the fair is available on the ICSF website (<http://www.icsf.net/fishfair>).

## From Africa/ Benin

### I will pay you one day...

*Women fish processors are hesitant to supply fish on credit to wholesalers, as discussions during a meeting with women fish processors in Benin revealed.*

**By the Union of Professionals in the Artisanal Fishery of Benin (UNIPPA-BENIN, translated by Lucien Dehy, General Secretary of ID Pêche**

In a meeting organized in January by ID Pêche with the support of UNIPPA-BENIN, delegates from women's groups and fishermen groups met at Nicoué-Condji in the sub-prefecture of Grand-Popo, about 100 kms from Cotonou. Also participating in this meeting were representative of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and of the Centre de Recherches pour le Développement des Technologies Intermediaires de Pêche (CREDETIP), Senegal.

One of the issues discussed with the women fish processors present there was the Processed Fish Fair to be held in Dakar, Senegal, in June 2001. In this connection, there was a discussion on various aspects of fish trade in the region.

Women processors were asked about whether they supply fish on credit to wholesale traders. Sale on credit is rare they said. According to them, it was common for traders to visit fishing camps, to get supplies of smoked and fermented, salted and dried fish. Often the traders may only pay for a part of their purchases. In the camps, processing women are used to that and they may not hesitate to provide credit for up to 15 days.

Unfortunately, some fish traders then do not honour their commitments. When this happens they avoid the camps and generally disappear from the markets frequented by the processors. This devious behaviour puts the processing women, with little capital at their disposal, in a precarious position. When the processing women catch up with the traders, it is with great passion that the debt is reclaimed.

Even as the women were describing this scene, one of them burst into a song, and the others joined her. The song, it seems, is one which fish traders sing when confronted by women processors demanding their payment:

Through a mutual and private arrangement,  
you agreed to sell to me on credit  
There was no witness  
Through a mutual and private arrangement,  
You provided me a loan  
There were no indiscreet ears  
Today in the centre of the market  
You yell in a high and loud voice  
That I'm an insolvent debtor  
You yell high and loud  
That Chérie is in debt  
But debt is not theft  
I will pay you  
Owing you is not stealing from you  
I will pay you  
I will pay you one day



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## From Africa/ Mozambique

### Proud of their achievements

*An enterprising group of women from a remote island in Mozambique, get together to increase their income*

**By Nalini Nayak, a member of ICSF, in consultation with the Institute for the Development of Small-Scale Fisheries (IDPPE), Mozambique**

Tucked away in the lush mangroves, an hour's boat ride from Angoche, in Mozambique, lies the little island of Mituban. With the impression that one is sailing through a water forest, one alights in the water, wades through the younger mangroves and steps on to land as if alighting on another planet. Walking a little further, one realizes that one is in a fairly populous

little village, with majestic coconut palms and neatly thatched huts scattered all over. The first little fence is the playground of a rather large school, again with mud walls and thatched roof. People are gathered in the shade of a large cashew tree. In the majority are the women, who then talk about their work.

This is an exclusively Muslim village. The men have been hunting crabs using their small canoes and little spears and their hands. Selling these crabs to mainland merchants brings them the cash they need to buy food. But, for the most part, this little island is self-sufficient, with potters who make the utensils, carpenters who make the furniture from mangrove wood, people who thatch their own houses and make rope from the coconut fibre. They grow their own vegetables and rice in the marshes when the salinity in the water falls. People seem to be dependent on the mainland mainly for medical assistance and higher-level schooling.

It is on this little island, that the women fishers have a collective. The origins of this group are ambiguous but from what the women say, it happened in mid-1998 when a couple from an NGO called PENDANA visited the island and interacted with the women. They suggested that the women could earn money through shrimp capture and sale. This couple brought in some small nylon gill-nets and insulated boxes and suggested that the women work in pairs, each pair using one net to catch shrimp. As 32 women were initially interested, 16 groups were formed. All went well and the couple came regularly to collect the shrimp that they took to sell to the mainland. After two months, the women began asking for their money and the couple kept putting it off. This went on for six full months. The couple then disappeared and the women were left high and dry.

The local fishing community in Angoche, which was in the process of organizing through the Nampula Artisanal Fisheries Project, a project initiated by IDPPE, heard about the plight of these women. The enthusiastic secretary of the APPA (the newly created Fishermen's Association), then tried to do all he could to get these women their due. The fisheries association helped the women's group to elaborate a project proposal, that was then submitted to the office of the First Lady through the District Office. The project was approved and a grant was made available for the purchase of a motor boat for this group. Once the women had a boat of their own, they were able to take their shrimp to sell directly and money started coming

in. Enthused by this success, other women joined the group, which has now doubled to 64 members.

Each pair records the quantity of shrimp caught, and the women collectively decide on who goes to sell the catch. Two percent of the income from the sale is deposited in a common fund maintained by the secretary of the group. Each woman has a book in which her contributions are recorded. Interestingly, after being cheated in the initial stages, the women do not trust anybody with their money, not even a bank. So they handle it themselves and they have a fairly large sum stored away somewhere. Now they also have a loan from the APPA with which they have bought more nets for their members. The group now owns two boats, one freezer and a generator.

This is indeed an interesting and enthusiastic group of women who feel proud of their achievements. All these women earlier gathered seafood for their own consumption. Being so far away from civilization as it were, they managed with what they had. Their men still do not own any boats or gear but continue to hunt crab and gather fuel from the mangroves. Being distrustful of outside assistance, this little group is determined to learn by trial and error. Their freezer is not yet functional and to operate and manage it will entail additional costs and skills that the women themselves do not have at present.

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## From South Pacific/ Niue

### A complete documentation

*Fieldwork in the small island of Niue aims to identify and document the important marine species collected by women*

**by Lyn Lambeth, Community Fisheries Officer of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) in New Caledonia**

In November 2000 the Community Fisheries Section of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) completed fieldwork in Niue, a small Polynesian island located in the centre of a triangle made up of Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands. The work was requested by the Niue government as part of ongoing SPC assistance to Niue in the area of sustainable development and management of its marine resources.

The aim of the fieldwork was to identify and document the important marine invertebrate species collected by women in Niue, to look at potential management measures for those species, and to ensure that species collected by women are included in an inshore fisheries management plan being developed by Niue Fisheries and SPC.

Although Niue has only a small fisheries section, they recently created a new position—Women's Fisheries Development Officer—and they remain committed to seeing that the entire community is consulted and included in their work.

Niue, with a total land area of only 258 sq km and a circumference of 65 km, is reputedly the largest upraised coral atoll in the world. The population is less than 2,000, with nearly 10 times that number of Niueans now residing in New Zealand. Niue has no lagoon and only a narrow fringing reef surrounds most of the island. The former reef and lagoon is raised to about 60 m above sea level, descending to depths of over 1000 m within 5 km of the shore.

Although a number of studies have been done on the marine resources of Niue, none have resulted in a clear idea of exactly what, or how many species of invertebrates are utilized in Niue. At first glance the rugged coastline and small reef flat area, accessible only in calm weather and at low tide, would appear to have few species that could be utilized. However the women gather a surprisingly large number of invertebrates for food and shellcraft.

By the end of the two-week fieldwork 92 Niuean invertebrate names had been recorded. 55 of those were actually observed on reef trips, 29 of them are used for food, and around 10 species or groups of species are used for shellcraft. Over 70 species have been definitely or tentatively identified. The list is by no means exhaustive but will be a useful guide to the most commonly utilized species. Once the work has been completed a report will be submitted to Niue with recommendations for management of the most important species.

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## Who is a fishworker?

*A discussion group on gender and fisheries at a recent seminar in Brazil, debated the situation of women of fishing communities*

**By Maria Cristina Manesch, a professor at the Federal University of Para in Belem, Brazil, and a member of ICSF**

During the General Assembly of the *Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores* (CPP), held in Lagoa Seca, Paraíba State, Brazil from 17 to 19 November 2000, one of the themes was 'Gender Relations in Fisheries'. A discussion group was formed with 29 participants, most of them women from different fishing communities. There were also support people from NGOs, as well as community and union leaders. This represented a rare opportunity to understand the various ways in which women participate in the fisheries and in fishworker organizations, the difficulties they face in being recognized and valued, as well as to discuss the progress that has been made. Some of the debates are described below.

One of the participants, Mrs. Roquelina Almeida, introduced herself as follows: "fisherwoman, poetess, writer, director of the *colônia* (professional organization of fishermen) of fishermen from Maragogipe, Bahia State, and director of the local association of residents." She said that she had begun fishing since she was a child, but that in her time, "a woman could only be a *marisqueira* (seafood collector). Today, thank God I got the right of being a *pescadora* (fisherwoman)."

A shared view among the participants was that women often do not consider themselves as fishers. According to Mrs. Petrúcia, president of the co-operative of Ponto da Barra, Maceió, Alagoas: "women are quiet; they are fisherwomen, but they don't like to participate. However, the men are worse than the women, they participate even less." She emphasized the fragility of the organization of fishermen, an opinion shared by many of those present.

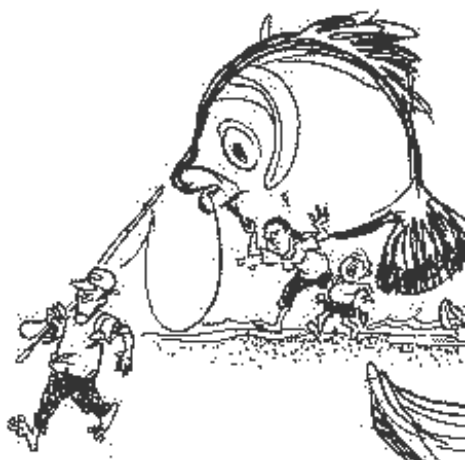
In her turn, a fisherwoman named Lídia, director of the *colônia* of Aranaín in the municipal district of Cachoeira, Pará state, said that in her community progress had been notable. Four of the five directors in Fortim are presently women (all except for the President).

**From Latin America/ Brazil**

Mrs. Dolores, sociologist from Instituto Terramar, Ceará state, pointed to the lack of data in governmental bodies, in universities, and in organizations, on the work women do in fisheries. In the municipality of Fortim, for example, women collect seafood and they fish. As a result of the work of the current President of the *colônia*, a woman, there are today about 80 women registered in the *colônia*. In other places in Ceará, some women collect algae and, sometimes, they fish with nets on the shore. The algae has a good market for the cosmetics industry, but the collectors sell this at very low prices. At times this income is the only one for maintaining the family.

Dolores emphasized that many women in fishing communities combine fishing with handicraft and other activities. This makes their official recognition as fishers by the technicians from the welfare institute, difficult. While investigating cases in villages, they have to decide whether the woman applying for retirement or other benefits is a housewife, an embroiderer or a fisher.

The characteristic *machismo* of the *colônia* was described by Francisca Ester of Parajuru, Ceará, President of the local community association. "The only woman who goes to the *colônia* there, is me. You don't see a woman there. I ask the fishermen, please, bring your wives for the *colônia* meetings so they can get informed!" According to Francisca, almost all of the villagers in Parajuru take crabs in the swamps, as well as oysters and *sururus* (small mussels).



Mrs. Cárita Chagas, president of the women's association in the village of Cachoeira, Pará,

emphasized the points common to the situation of women across several states. She emphasized that the Mayor of her town and the management of the *colônia* have not showed any interest in complying with the demands of the fishers, men or women, especially of the women. With the support of outsiders, women in her municipality have formed two associations. These women took an active role during the last elections of the *colônia*. "Last year we removed the former President of the *colônia*. The current one is committed and the women have more space inside it. ...The *colônia* of the municipal district was founded 70 years ago. However, it was opened to women only a year ago. Unfortunately in many cases the barrier is cultural. It is the history of submission that is reproduced."

The subject, *who is fisherman or fisherwoman*, raised heated discussions. One of the issues discussed was the status of the women who weave nets, salt fish, take care of the fishing equipment and other related tasks. Who are they? Do they have to be recognized as fishworkers? In fact, they are not considered legally as fishworkers.

In this context it was noted that in this discussion group on gender, there were hardly a few men. This was seen as indicative of the fact that within the category of fishermen, the discussion on such issues still interests only the women and is not seen as a priority.

The participants of this mini-seminar presented their 'histories'. In spite of the progress that has been made, their testimonies showed that while women work, and have always worked, their work remains largely invisible.

The seminar pointed to the urgent need to produce data concerning women's work in the fisheries, and the links between fishing and other related work. If the statistics on fisheries are poor, on the work of women in the fisheries, they are absent. The traditional approach that regards women's works as 'complementary' reinforces this invisibility.

The testimonies at the seminar made it clear that women in fishing communities undertake different activities, unlike the fishermen, who tend to be specialized (net fishermen, fixed-trap fishermen, lobster fishermen etc). Women:

- fish in several ways (the *marisqueira* also fishes)
- collect algae
- weave and repair fishing nets

- take up other activities through the year (embroidery, craft, agriculture...)
- participate in community work (like for instance, in the residents' associations in Ceará they have taken up the fight against land speculation).

It was clear that the barriers remain. Many participants referred to the weight of the 'cultural issue'. And, in Brazil, several social benefits are linked to the status of a person as a worker. The need to change this situation was stressed, because it is source of social exclusion.

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## From Latin America/ Chile

### Book Talk

*A personal account of a visit to Peru, which the author, Professor Maria Terease López Boegeholz, a sociologist based in Chile, would like to share with artisanal fishermen/women and with professionals working with coastal communities.*

I visited fishing communities of Paracas in Pisco, Peru on the invitation of Amelia García, a Peruvian sociologist. She was making the trip to present her book titled: *Los culpables desconocidos: Artisanal Fishworkers and the Environment in the National Reserve of Paracas, Pisco*, to the inhabitants of the *caletas* (fishing communities) who had provided her with the information and inspiration for this book, and who, besides this, had offered her "a lot of warmth". This was to express her gratitude towards the people who offered her the hospitality of their homes, as well as the support and the motivation she needed to write this book.

In the port of Callao we visited the union of fishworkers. The 1800 members of this union are mainly shellfish collectors, boat-owners and longliners. Their boats and nets are small. The union is linked to the Committee of *Jaladeros*—those who wash the boats.

In Chorillos, Lima, our contact was Ms. Paquita Ramos, the first President of the *Comité de Damas* (Women's Committee) of FIUPAP (The Federation for the Integration and Unification of Artisanal Fishworkers in Peru), founded in 1992. However, as there were never enough funds, they had to knock at

many doors. She now works in the Ministry of Health, and manages health services for fishworkers. She has one of the restaurants under her in the scheme *Pesquero del Muelle* (Dock Fishworkers, literally translated). Her experience would be of great value in an exchange with successful women working in artisanal fisheries in Chile.



In the port of San Andres we met the Port Administrator. The wives of the fishermen here sell the fish catch. The fish are washed well with plenty of water and are laid out on the ground for sale. The major species are *cabrilla* (*Paralabrax humeralis*) which amounts to approximately 180 tonnes per month, *cabinza* (*Isacia conceptionis*), *ayanque* (*Cynoscion analis*) and *chita* (*Anisotremus scapularis*). The fish is sold in boxes or by the dozen. The larger fish are sold in kilograms. Large vessels fishing in shallow waters, targeting mainly anchovies to supply fishmeal factories, catch a large number of small fish, and cause great damage.

In Laguna Grande, a village with temporary shacks, we were guided by Ms. Tita from the *Centro de Madres* (Mothers Club), and the daughter of one of the founders of the *Rancherías* (collection of shacks of fishworkers). The police personnel from the Paracas Police Headquarters and the Paracas National Park Security had tried to catch those using explosives—outsiders without permits—who had eventually escaped. The outsiders had stored their gear in a small inn, in the care of an old man they had paid, and this man had been imprisoned. The women had come together to protest in Paracas against this imprisonment and to testify in favour of the old man, seeking his release.

We observed the entry of vessels fishing at a depth of six fathoms in the bay area, which is prohibited. We conversed with old fishermen who had come here from Comatraca-Ica, their place of residence. Here, their workplaces are the little temporary shacks constructed on the shores of the beach. Their living conditions are very difficult, without water, electricity, proper drainage or sewage systems. As one of the young mothers, a niece of Ms. Tita explained, “they live like the fish, moving constantly— the fisherman goes where the fish is”

We then visited El Chaco accompanied by Ms. Gregoria. This was a visit to study family life in these parts. Ms. Gregoria is married to the grandson of the founder of El Chaco and is the first woman *chalanera* of the place. *Chalana* is the name of a boat used to ferry the fishermen from their boats to the beach and *vice versa*.

We also visited the Association of the Inhabitants of El Chaco and the *Atracadero Flotante Artesanal* (The Floating Artisanal Pier in El Chaco), a tourist attraction.

In La Gunillas we met Tia Fela, a 93-year old lady, who owns a family-run restaurant. This place has a dock to offload fish and shellfish. Nevertheless there is pressure to privatize the place and get rid of the fishermen. Amelia's book influenced Tia Fela's family deeply as they are fighting to continue living in the place.

The problems faced by artisanal fishworkers in Peru are similar to those observed in Chile. However there is, in comparison, a lack of political awareness among the Peruvian fishworkers. During our conversations with them we found them to be poorly informed in political terms. The fishermen had little or no knowledge of the relations between CONAPACH (The National Confederation of Artisanal Fishworkers of Chile) and FIUPAP or of the Accord of 1998 signed by these two institutions.

The women, who are heads of extended families, have an important role to play in the family economy and many of them take an active part in fisheries activities. They have conserved and maintained the customs of the Andean culture, an issue being studied by Amelia, who is discovering roots of this culture among the coastal communities. Her book also describes this connection.

In the *caletas* of La Gunillas, El Chaco and Laguna Grande (the beach and residential areas), fishing communities are under pressure to leave the place and to make way for modernization and the development of tourism. Amelias book is her contribution to defending the cause of the inhabitants of these *caletas*. (Maria Terease López Boegeholz can be contacted at [mtlopezb@hotmail.com](mailto:mtlopezb@hotmail.com))

## From Asia/ India

### Harsh working conditions....

***The National Campaign on Labour Rights (NCLR), India—a network of trade unions and other support groups—has initiated a campaign to highlight the exploitative conditions of work faced by women workers in fish processing plants in India. We carry the letter written by NCLR to the Union Ministry of Labour, India.***

We are a group of trade unions, NGOs, and concerned citizens who have been monitoring the developments in the fish and seafood processing industry, particularly from the perspective of labour rights. We have conducted a number of studies to gather in-depth information about labour conditions in this sector and we have come to a conclusion that the situation in this regard appears to be alarming, to say the least. We wish to convey our observations through this letter and also to establish communication with your association on this issue.

We are aware that over the last few years, marine food products have come to occupy an important position among India's exports and, consequently, are a major source of foreign exchange so vital to India's economy. We also appreciate the new employment opportunities it has opened for the workforce. However, we are dismayed to note that not only have the gains of the sector's phenomenal growth not percolated down to the workers employed therein, but that the situation of the latter remains no better than that of bonded labourers.

The industry is almost completely run on the basis of young migrant women workers who are employed either on contract or piece-rate basis. The factory owners disclaim any responsibility for the workers on the pretext that the latter are the responsibility of not

them but the contractors. As a matter of fact, this is in complete violation of the Contract Labour Act, which holds that the ultimate responsibility of the workers lies with the principal employer.

It has been observed that the living conditions of the workers are inhuman and highly oppressive. Around 40 to 50 women are provided with one hall which generally has just a couple of bathrooms. These dwelling units, usually located atop or beside the processing unit, are also characterized by extremely unhygienic conditions and a lack of sanitary facilities. Living in such proximity to the processing unit also exposes the workers to hazardous substances and chemical leaks.

You may be aware that a strict surveillance is maintained over the women workers in the fish processing industry and they are not allowed to go outside the factory premise or their place of accommodation. A total control over the lives of the women workers is an important characteristic of this industry. It's a virtual confinement for them where they live like bonded labour.

The workers are made to work from 8 am to 8 pm with just a one-hour lunch break and a half-hour tea break. In peak season, workers are often forced to work beyond the normal 12 hours. Also, paying them extremely low wages is the norm rather than the exception, and a large number of units don't even pay their workers the legally-stipulated minimum wages. In a study conducted by Centre for Education and Communication (CEC), it was revealed:

- In Mumbai, 20 workers out of 50 get less than Rs1,500 per month.
- In Mangalore, most of the workers earned between Rs900 to 1,200, peaking to Rs2,000 in some busy months. At the same time, there are also months when the income dips to the level of Rs500.
- In Tuticorin, in the sample of 47 it was found that 34 got up to a maximum of Rs1,500 and 18 of them got below the prescribed minimum wage.
- In Calcutta, out of a sample of 32 workers, 14 were found to get below Rs1,000. On the higher side, it was found that seven got more than Rs.2,000.

The working conditions in these units are very harsh. The workers are made to work without any protection. This renders the workers highly susceptible to common diseases like malaria, chickenpox, and jaundice.

Peeling and handling frozen material over long periods of time leads to the skin of the palms developing rashes and even peeling off. If this remain untreated for long, it may develop serious infections. These may even compel the affected workers to leave the job. It also transpires that employers do not provide any medical facilities. Such a practice is questionable even from the point of view of expediency, since the health of the workers has a direct bearing on the hygienic quality of the product and, consequently, its saleability in the international market.

The above are only some of the most glaring problems characterizing this industry. We would like your ministry to respond to the issue of labour rights in this sector and come out with a fact sheet on this issue so that we can initiate a dialogue on it. This is extremely important for an export-oriented industry because it also has to be internationally accountable for the labour right records. As you know, this sector is already being internationally monitored for hygiene of the product and environmental impact. It has also faced sanctions in the past due to these reasons. Hence, it would also be in the interest of the processing industry and national economy to improve labour conditions in this sector.

We hope your ministry would look into the specific issues raised by us and take stern steps to effectively enforce the relevant labour laws in this sector. In particular, we request you to organize a tripartite meeting (i.e. between representatives of the workers, the industry and the Government) with a view to evolve mechanisms to address issues regarding the fish-and seafood-processing industry, such as the constitution of a welfare board for its workers.

*(More information about this campaign is available from [cec@nda.vsnl.net.in](mailto:cec@nda.vsnl.net.in))*

## From Asia/ India

### There is a way out...

*As part of the same campaign (above), the National Campaign on Labour Rights (NCLR) has brought out a small booklet titled 'The Story of Suja Abraham'. We carry an excerpt from this.*

Suja Abraham was like any of the thousands of young women workers who migrate from Kerala every year to work in the fish processing industry in Maharashtra and other coastal states. Normally, she would work for ten months, go back to her family for a month or



so, and again join back on work for the next season. This cycle would go on for years without leaving any trace or record of her existence as a worker in the unit concerned or anywhere else for that matter. She would become just one of the countless and faceless workers as if she had no identity.

Thanks to a combination of various factors, including the timely and effective intervention of trade unions and other organizations, and her own extraordinary perseverance, Suja Abraham could survive the torture meted out to her and even fight for what was due to her. In the process, she has unwittingly become the symbol of the struggle carried on by women workers in the fish-and seafood-processing industry across the country. The landmark judgement by the Mumbai High Court, on the writ petition filed by Suja together with the organizations supporting her, is a major step in the struggle, while highlighting at the same time the sheer magnitude of the task still remaining.

(For more details contact [cec@nda.vsnl.net.in](mailto:cec@nda.vsnl.net.in))

## From Asia/ Thailand

### Revivers of the Thai Seas

*The following 'communique' was issued at a seminar held in November 2000 in Hatyai, Thailand. It is compiled from information provided by the Project on Coastal Zone Management through Community Organizations and Networks in Southern Thailand.*

Fisherfolk, academics, students, NGOs and social activists held a seminar on 'Fisherfolk and Coastal Resources Management: Problems and the Strategies for Finding Solutions'. This was held at the Central Library, Prince of Songkhla University, Hatyai, Songkhla Province from 18 to 20 November 2000. The communique issued was as follows:

1. Thai seas are now in crisis with the ecological fallout of overfishing due to the use of destructive fishing gear that destroy aquatic life. The total area under mangrove forests has decreased from 2 million rai to 1 million rai (1 rai equals 2.5 acres) between 1961 to 1999. Songkhla lake has become shallow because of the impact of the 'Pakrava Dam'. Waterways are polluted by waste-water from factories and shrimp farms. These crises must be solved urgently by every sector of society to bring life back to Thai seas.
2. The rehabilitation of Thai seas must be based on a

clear vision, together with a clear target for recovering the bounty and biodiversity of marine resources. The administration and management of the coastal resources should be initiated with people's participation in all activities, and by respecting the rights of the community to benefit from the sustainable economic use of the resources of the sea.

3. Fisherfolk have been misunderstood by some segments of Thai society and it is believed that they are fighting for more fish trade and for more profits. In fact, the way of life of fisherfolk is simple. They use boats and small-scale fishing gear that do not destroy the sea and its resources. The main objective of their struggle is to demand the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources.



4. The participants of this seminar agree to continue work towards the following objectives:

- To increase community awareness, to reinforce networks of co-operation for the conservation and revival of Thai seas, to protect the community against destruction of natural resources, and to protect their rights to it;
- To campaign for the amendment of the Fishery Law, so that it is in agreement with the constitution of 1997, creating the space for the empowerment of people in resources management, for respecting local and community rights, and for reinforcing people's participation in making policies and laws related to the sea and to the way of life of local people;
- To prohibit fishing gear that destroy the marine ecological system and natural resources.

5. The recommendations to be submitted to politicians and political parties are as follows:

- Change the aim of marine resources management, from an economic to an ecological orientation, with the greatest emphasis on restoring the marine environment.
- To improve the Fisheries Law of 1947 with people's participation;
- To prohibit destructive fishing gear, such as push nets, trawl nets and the use of electric lights for nocturnal anchovy fishing.

We, the network of people's organizations, strongly state our common will to revive the Thai seas. We will follow-up on our proposals and demands with the government, politicians, political parties and concerned sectors, to maintain the integrity of the marine ecosystem and the food and economic security of Thai people, and to make sure that the Thai seas will be a heritage for future generations.

(For further details contact [ff-net@hatyaiinet.co.th](mailto:ff-net@hatyaiinet.co.th))

## From Latin America/ Mexico

### Migrating to survive

*Women crabmeat processors from the Mexican state of Tabasco opt to migrate to the US, despite the difficulties they face*

**Excerpted from a case study prepared by Laura Vidal, Co-ordinator of the St. Thomas Ecological Association of Women, Mexico, for the 'Workshop on Gender and Coastal Fishing Communities in Latin America' organized in June 2000 in Brazil**

The migration of Mexican men and women to the US has been documented since the end of the last century, but not for those who come from the Mexican southeast, specifically from the coastal areas of the state of Tabasco. The majority of Tabascan women, who initiated the migration to North Carolina, come from the municipalities of Paraíso and Jalapa de Méndez.

The migration process is linked to the establishment of the company *Mariscos Boca de México* in the Chiltepec municipality of Paraíso. This was set up in 1986 with the objective of exporting fresh and natural crabmeat to the US.

According to the migrant crabmeat processors, the majority of the employees of this company come from Jalapa de Méndez because the women of Chiltepec no longer want to work for the company after it became *gringo*-owned. The people of the Chiltepec community like neither the company nor its owner and they make fun of the women who work there. They call them stinky because of the strong odour of crab that they give off at the end of the workday.



The migration process was initiated in 1989 when 24 female crabmeat processors, who used to work for *Mariscos Boca de México*, decided to go to work in North Carolina, USA. Under authority of the owner of the company, a US agent initiated the process of contracting crabmeat processors to work in American plants.

The first women migrants were highly criticized in the Chiltepec community and people would comment that the women certainly went there to become prostitutes and that they would never return to their homes. When the migrants returned after the first season and brought money with them, more confidence was generated for the migration in the second year.

From November to March women work in the Chiltepec plant and then migrate to North Carolina for the April to November season. There are five companies in North Carolina that contract the Tabascan women for crabmeat processing—the biggest one contracting up to 150 women. It is estimated that since 1989 some 1,000 Tabascan women have made the journey to work in the crabmeat processing plants of North Carolina. In the US, other crabmeat processing

plants, not related to the company, *Boca de Mexico*, exist, where the work environment is less stressful than in the plants where the Tabascan women work.

The hiring process depends upon the requirements of each company. The selection of employees is based on their workplace capability—according to the contract they must be able to process at least 24 pounds daily. At the same time, the person must be able to meet the legal requirements such as birth certificate, passport, and money for the visa. Potential employees must also have the resources to pay the expenses of their travel and stay (food, lodging, and uniform) and must have the recommendation of someone recognized by *Mariscos Boca de México*. Finally, they must promise to be ‘well behaved’. The companies commonly provide medical insurance to the crabmeat processors, but they do not take care of the medical or visa expenses, nor do they cover air travel to and from North Carolina.

The majority of women crabmeat processors are married with children. Their schooling barely consists of a few grades of primary education. The women assert that the main reasons that lead them to migrate are: to complement the resources of the family unit, to avoid having their children quit school, economic necessity, and to improve their housing.

Married women comment that the principal problems that arise, given their absence from the home, are: their husband’s anger over the abandonment of his children, his infidelity and an increase in his consumption of alcohol. “I don’t travel any more because of my children and because my husband, Antonio, doesn’t want me to. He would tell me off because his son was arriving from high school in Aquiles Serdán at 1 am in the morning. In the first year he told me that he wanted me to go, but when I was there he told me that this would be the last year... (Aurelia)”. Or “When I returned, my husband was worse because he was always drinking. He would drink for a month and they’d put him in jail... (Antonia)”.

Living conditions in North Carolina, vary depending on the employing plant. The conditions of housing and services provided are inadequate and so must be shared collectively, in some cases among large groups. Some migrants rent rooms, but the majority are housed in trailers with rooms where eight to 10 people live. They eat in collective dining rooms where they must stand in long lines to get the food. Their recreation

consists of going out in groups supervised by the company. There are also companies that do not let their workers go beyond certain boundaries. “...Up there it’s like a prison. You have to line up. There are 140 people waiting to eat. There were only four televisions to watch...(Francisca)”. Or “...We would go out on Sunday. They would take us in groups of 15 to 20 people to go shopping... (Virginia)”.

It is interesting to note that these conditions simultaneously foster attitudes of solidarity and mutual support as well as of competition and conflict. Frequently, groups are organized in order to alternate tasks like cooking, cleaning of rooms, being around in cases of illness or depression. The usual motives for conflict are related to difficult living conditions—fights over use of bathrooms, cleaning of areas—and the competition related to the different levels of output in piece-work.

Migrant women note that the workdays that go on for so long, as much in the Chiltepec, Tabasco plant as in North Carolina, are exhausting. However, the economic reward is significantly different. In North Carolina the pay is by piece-work and varies between US\$1.28 and US\$1.60 per pound of crabmeat. Some say that they can do up to 60 pounds a day and earn an average of US\$1,000 every two weeks. In Mexico they are paid a monthly salary of 800 pesos, that is to say the equivalent of US\$80. Of course, it must be remembered that working outside one’s country requires one to shell out sizeable sums in rent and food (approximately US\$40 and US\$21 a week respectively), cover health expenses, and pay the costs of travel and the accompanying paperwork.

In spite of the difficult working conditions, the majority of migrant women express a preference for working in the US. The economic reasons for this preference are very important, but they are not the only reasons. Women also experience a heightened sense of self-esteem. “...My husband wouldn’t take me into consideration. Now, I told him that if he doesn’t shape up he can leave, but I’m staying in the US. I achieved my goal in spite of what my husband says... (Chuncha).”

(*Laura Vidal can be contacted through [das@laneta.apc.org](mailto:das@laneta.apc.org)*)

**LETTERS/ France**

Dear Friends,  
 Many of us, from both the North and South, signed a common declaration that was carried in the last number of Yemaya. To be precise, this was as a result of discussions and contacts made in October 2000 at Loctudy, in

France, where women from coastal communities worldwide decided to work together.

It must be remembered that a large number of people have been working for a long time to establish a single body representing fishworkers, capable of applying sufficient pressure to influence decision-makers through their joint pressure and solidarity. It must also be recalled that the Forum called for parity between men and women at all levels and that you, you the women, took this forward. The split that arose at the end of that week in Loctudy, which gave birth to two Forums, must not make us lose sight of the important objectives that we worked on together in the same document.

The women, through their call for unity, have clearly shown how important it is to keep intact the richness of the human and cultural patrimony that was created through these meetings. There was an amazing resolve in all of us to move things forward; networks were established and above all, a solidarity between women to project into, and imagine, the future. We should not get weighed down with this feeling of failure but rather develop a vision that will not be lost in reports of impotence and bitterness.

For the well-being of our communities, we must strongly believe that those of us who wish to continue this exchange of experiences will find the strength to succeed. The pessimists will see the failure of a project to reunite delegates from 32 countries (what a wealth of humanity), as due to too much diversity in culture and technical practices. The optimists have observed that even if it was not possible to reach an arrangement or consensus, at least some awareness was raised. So let's be objective and optimistic. If Loctudy gave birth to two Forums, nothing should get in the way of them joining forces to undertake collective action on the numerous points on which they agree. Bringing together the two Forums, even if that will take time, is not utopian. However, you,

the women, did not need to wait long to understand that and to sign a common motion declaring that you will continue to work together. To this end, it will be useful if women can meet in the coming months. Through the means of Yemaya, we ask you to think about this and to make suggestions on such a future meeting.

Madame Danièle Le Sauce  
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Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We would also like names of other people who could be interested in being part of this initiative. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.

Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also